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SUBJECT: S/E CUMBER'S JULY 21 MEETINGS IN PARIS

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Summary

11. (SBU) Special Envoy to the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) Sada Cumber stressed the importance of Muslim integration, social cohesion and individual accountability during his visit to Paris July 21. At the Institute of the Arab World, he outlined the U.S. Government's effort to establish digital libraries in developing Muslim countries and emphasized the essential role of education in helping Islamic youth resist extremism. The Institute's leaders expressed openness to cooperation with the S/E's office. They also discussed impediments to progress in the Arab world, such as conflict, lack of education and the lingering effects of colonialism. At the Grand Mosque, S/E Cumber summarized U.S. cooperation with the OIC and asked about French Muslims' experiences with integration. The Mosque's leaders related that the colonial past, social stigmatization and economic challenges have hindered Muslims' ability to assimilate and advance in France. They praised the U.S. digital library initiative and agreed with S/E Cumber's view that the 25 million Muslims who live in free societies should exert a positive influence for the hundreds of millions who don't. S/E Cumber also met with the Aga Khan and discussed cooperation with the United States, religious defamation issues and the Aga Khan's programs in Europe. End Summary.

World Arab Institute

12. (SBU) S/E Cumber opened the meeting at the World Arab Institute by outlining the U.S. government's digital library program for the developing Muslim world. The digital libraries include material on subjects ranging from health and the environment to good governance and rule of law. The goal is to empower individuals to achieve positive change in their societies, S/E Cumber said, stressing that the United States and the World Arab Institute could work together to that end. He outlined the challenges many Muslim countries face, noting that in addition to suffering from an overall lack of transparency and accountability, governments have much catching up to do on the economic front. Muslim countries cover 22 percent of the world's land surface, are home to 20

percent of its population, and contain 70 percent of its natural resources (including 40 percent of energy reserves). Yet Islamic nations account for only 7 percent of global GDP, S/E Cumber said.

¶3. (SBU) Education is one key to improving this record, he contended. Wahabism and other extremist schools of Muslim thought have failed to make inroads in former Soviet republics because the populations are generally well educated, he said. The United States wants to enhance the OIC's education initiatives and bolster progressiveness in Islamic societies.

¶4. (SBU) World Arab Institute Director General Mokhtar Taleb Bendiab responded that while his organization focuses only on Arab Muslim countries, he agreed with S/E Cumber's overall points. He added that the culture of democracy has lagged in Arab countries because "Islam has not yet shed its old skin" and has evolved only slowly in terms of progressive thinking. Foreign invasions, lack of education and the lingering effects of colonialism have hindered progress. Advancement has occurred where societies embrace reason and science; governments that have turned away from rationality in favor of attaching importance to extreme interpretations of religion have fallen behind.

¶5. (SBU) The Arab-Israeli conflict also fans extremism in the Arab world, Bendiab said. Leyla Hazaz-Letayf, the Institute's chief of staff, added that "big countries" (that is, the United States) should "work reasonably with Arab countries to solve the big problems, including between Israelis and

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Palestinians." She criticized the United States for taking actions that in her view undermine rational discourse and encourage extremists. "Many Arabs have the sense that the United States is playacting," Hazaz-Letayf remarked. Bendiab tempered Hazaz-Leytaf's statements, emphasizing that if the United States takes productive steps on the Middle East, we will be rewarded with a "new commitment" from the parties involved in conflict.

¶6. (SBU) S/E Cumber rejected the idea that the United States does not play a constructive role in the Middle East. He pledged, however, to convey Bendiab and Hazaz-Leytaf's remarks to Washington. He returned to the theme of unity, underlining that in the United States, the 5 million Muslims are cohesive because they live in a free society and take accountability seriously. The Muslim community in Houston accounts for some USD 3 billion of the local economy. The contrast with the Middle East and other areas is striking. Elsewhere in the world, "Muslims have failed to build enabling societies," S/E Cumber observed, underlining that "there is such a term as personal responsibility." S/E Cumber accepted Bendiab's invitation to return to the Institute to give remarks and participate in a roundtable in the coming months.

The Grand Mosque

¶7. (SBU) The discussion at the Grand Mosque focused on the integration experience of France's Muslims. Slimane Nabour, the Mosque's director for communications, provided a demographic overview, stressing that exact numbers are hard to come by because questions about religion are not allowed on France's census. He said there are probably about 4.5-5 million Muslims in France. Those of Algerian origin form the biggest bloc, with about 1.5-2 million

people. The next largest group consists of about 1 million Muslims of Moroccan origin. There are also significant numbers of Tunisians, Turks and West Africans. Nabour said the 1975 law allowing families to join immigrant workers was a pivotal moment in that it prompted a social shift toward a more settled immigrant population. While all citizens of France are supposed to be equal before the law, the reality has been mixed, Nabour contended. He related that France's colonial past, social stigmatization of immigrants and economic challenges have hindered Muslims' ability to assimilate and advance in France. In addition, French Muslims are far from united, Nabour observed. There are fissures along national origin lines as well as between competing schools of religious thought. Nabour praised the U.S. digital library initiative and agreed with S/E Cumber's view that the 25 million Muslims who live in free societies should exert a positive influence for the hundreds of millions who don't. He underlined that the program should focus especially on youth.

Meeting with the Aga Khan

¶8. (SBU) S/E Cumber also met with the Aga Khan at his residence in Normandy. The Aga Khan told S/E Cumber that he and his organizations are open to cooperation with the United States. He added that his foundation, the Aga Khan Development Network, is currently in discussions with European governments in an effort to finalize memoranda of understanding that would institutionalize the Network's activities. Turning to the issue of religious defamation, the Aga Khan contended that governments should not be answerable for statements or actions that denigrate faith. Rather, individuals -- journalists and cultural figures, for example -- should be held accountable.

¶9. (U) S/E Cumber has cleared this message. Please visit Paris' Classified Website at:
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